SIX

The Complicity of the Ethical

Causality, Karma, and Violence in Buddhism and Levinas

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> Greek wisdom, therefore, is an opening, but it is also the possibility of speaking through signs which are not universally understood and which, as signs of complicity, thus have the power to betray.
>
> — Emmanuel Levinas, *Beyond the Verse*

> Ethics is no longer a simple moralism of rules decreed by the virtuous. It is the original awakening of an "I" responsible for others, the accession of my person to the uniqueness of the "I" called and elected to responsibility for others.
>
> — Emmanuel Levinas, *Unforeseen History*

Beyond the specific questionability of Greek philosophy for Emmanuel Levinas, and despite Socrates's testimony in the *Apology* that human wisdom is worth little or nothing in contrast with a divine wisdom that no mortals possess, there is a sense in which all wisdom is betrayal. Wisdom, even the most compassionate and pacifistic, can be complicit with injustice and violence and excuse suffering.[1] Yet, even as wisdom and communication can betray individuals and humanity, they potentially interrupt such complicity by indicating something other than betrayal in the midst of its power. The realities of war and exploitation, and the impossibility of the moral purity and fidelity of the virtuous and the wise, are not the conclusion but the point of departure for ethics according to Levinas in his preface to

Totality and Infinity. After the moralism of the righteous self, which abandons others to the imperfections of the world, there remains the possibility of awakening to the other in the ethical encounter. This ethical event, prior to the universal ethical reflection of the moralists and the prudential judgment of the virtuous, is the betrayal and complicity of the self who is implicated and thus must answer to the other in some way.

This contribution is an investigation of the intersections and tensions between morality and complicity, or ethics and causality, in Levinas and Buddhism with the aim of interrogating the possibility of a phenomenology of the ethical that neither brackets immanent, worldly, causal conditioning nor forgets it by transcending or excusing it.[2] The transcendent ethical moment that interrupts the relentless economy of the real is not simply a negation of immanence in the utopia, idealism, or other-worldliness critiqued by thinkers of radical immanence from Friedrich Nietzsche to Gilles Deleuze. Ethical interpolation occurs and is significant only in the context of the unethical, the earthly suffering that afflicts embodied sensibility in hunger and thirst, violence and war, birth, sickness, aging, and death. The ethical address happening within the midst of—and in antagonism with—the violence of being's immanence provokes the difficult task of responding to the other and of self-transformation.

I. Phenomenology, Buddhism, and the Question of Causality

Edmund Husserl's phenomenological method is frequently portrayed as beginning with the bracketing of the natural attitude of conventional, everyday life and the naturalistic causal-explanatory perspective of the sciences. Husserl placed causal explanation and causal conditioning out of play, whether it is naturalistic or historicist, for a realm of "motivated rationality."[3] In contrast with a hypothetically explained, causally constituted world, consciousness arrives through the bracketing of the epoché at its own constitutive powers and freedom in relation to things. The phenomenological method leads to the discovery of the spontaneity of intentionality as well as its indebtedness to its objects, as consciousness is inevitably intentional consciousness of one thing or another. As this consciousness is not only active but

also passive, phenomenology lives in the tension between the poles of a transcendental—if not transcendent—freedom and the conditions of being embodied in and affected by an environing world of objects. Through bodily life in an environing world, phenomenology is exposed to the passivity involved in all synthesis and to the receptivity to a historical situation through which consciousness must proceed. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty remarked, phenomenology not only concerns ideal essences and the priority of consciousness, but it "is also a philosophy which places essences back into existence, and does not expect to arrive at an understanding of humans and the world from any starting point other than that of their 'facticity.'"[4]

The phenomenological confrontation with facticity provokes the question of whether or not there can be a phenomenology of facticity and how this should be understood. For instance, should facticity primarily be understood ontologically or ethically? In the cases of Heidegger and Levinas, the world and the other interrupt their being put out of play, placing the priority of consciousness and its freedom into question. Despite their departures from transcendental phenomenology, neither philosopher returns to the naturalistic standpoint and its causally conditioned world. The phenomenology of facticity does not become one of causality. Perhaps this is because analyzing reality into a causal series, associated with a third-person perspective, is irreconcilable with the first- and second-person perspective of I and you associated with—despite their differences—transcendental, ontological, and ethical phenomenology.[5]

If phenomenological bracketing cannot return to the priority of causality, is it incompatible with Buddhism insofar as the Buddha is said to initiate his diagnosis with the very facticity of causal conditioning and its associated suffering? This raises two concerns: first, even if the Dharma promises—analogously to the freedom of consciousness described by Husserl—the ultimate reduction of causality in liberation, "the ultimate elimination of habit (karma) altogether," as phenomenological readings of Buddhist texts suggest, Buddhist thinkers of various traditions consistently warn of disregarding causal conditioning.[6] Karma as a causal order is the source of enslavement, yet it is at the same time the means and site of awakening through dharmic practices. Not recognizing the self's

worldly independence is itself a sign of the self's delusion about itself. Secondly, Buddhism—from Abhidharma and Yogācāra to Chan (禪, Jp. Zen)—has been depicted as phenomenological in unfolding rich, descriptive portrayals of experience and their dynamics as part of its diagnostic and therapeutic approach to human suffering. However, one can likewise ask in this case if the Buddhist exploration of phenomenological first-person personal experience arrives at the phenomenological subject—or is the first-person perspective itself something ultimately to be abandoned in the course of awakening like the raft that brings one to the other shore? To this extent, the Buddhist deconstruction of the self to its causal aggregates—its contingent, impersonal, and plural conditions—evokes the skepticism of David Hume or Nietzsche rather than Husserl's transcendental ego or the radically reconceptualized worldly and embodied self of Heidegger's Dasein or Merleau-Ponty's flesh.[7]

If the intercultural conjunction of phenomenology and Buddhism is problematic, the comparison of Buddhism and Levinas entails further complexities of distance and, more provocatively, affinity. Levinas's ethics of the priority of the other over the self has been repeatedly compared with the complete altruism and saintliness of the bodhisattva.[8] Gillian Rose, Slavoj Žižek, and others have used this resonance to criticize Levinas's philosophy as a "Buddhist Judaism" that posits an absurdly impossible ethical ideal and entails disastrous political consequences.[9] Levinasian and Buddhist ethics are, according to Žižek, excessively demanding and moralistic, naïve and unrealistic, and thereby open to endless cynical uses and maneuvers.[10] Levinas is interpreted by Rose and Žižek as radically emphasizing the absoluteness of ethical alterity and transcendence at the expense of indifference to real suffering. This critique is unfair, particularly since Levinas frequently focuses attention in his writings on concrete social and political issues such as wealth, labor, and poverty at the local and global levels. It nevertheless raises significant philosophical issues; does Levinas's ethics naively bracket and transcend the realities in which moral dramas are played out? Does he, following Husserl's phenomenological method, bracket causality and causal interdependence for pure experience and ideation? That is, is Levinas not an appropriate target of critique by the new materialism to the

extent that he is offering a phenomenological monadology of the other, or even a theological noumenology of the invisible, rather than dependent, conditional causal interaction with worldly others?[11]

II. Buddhism, Levinas, and the Impossible Possibility of Ethics

In contrast to this argument that they are unreasonably idealistic and moralistic, Buddhism and Levinas are remarkably attentive to the pragmatic and realistic dimensions of human existence. Trauma, violence, war, and delusion are not ignored but instead call forth a response and initiate practical description, analysis, and diagnosis. Although an altruistic ethics of perfected compassionate beings is in some sense exemplary in Buddhism, it engages in practice in descriptions, diagnoses, and meditative therapies concerning the causal conditioning, the suffering and violence, and the worldly complicity of embodied agents. Likewise, the ethical is not isolated in Levinas as a moralistic ideal separate from the processes of exchange, commerce, and business or from the realities of violence and suffering.[12]

As a thinker addressing the ethical in the course and wake of two world wars and the Holocaust, Levinas does not simply or moralistically dream of perpetual peace but instead describes how "war suspends morality" and is the greatest ordeal "of which morality lives" (*TI* 21). The traumatism of the ethical, of the interruption of the solidity and sufficiency of the self by the agony and pain of the other, is only thinkable in the context of destitution and betrayal. Levinas, accordingly, considers an ethical saying that is "made without compromise, and without a secret betrayal," while being unable to evade the betrayal of and indiscretion in relation to what is said (*IR* 257; *BPW7*, 113). In Levinas and Buddhism, the ethical is articulated in the context of its impossibility—that is, of the non- and antiethical—in conditionality and causality.[13]

Levinas's thought has an ethical force, without principles and prescriptions, and suggests an imprudent goodness without certainties. The force of the ethical is constituted by and bound to the fragility and failures of ethics in everyday life rather than being refuted by them.[14] Although Diane Perpich argues that the face should not be interpreted causally, its irreducibility is still related to the fragility and

conditionality of actual faces that are causally and materially affected. The transcendence of the face that reveals the command, "Thou shalt not kill" is bound to a face that is harmed, suffers, and is killed. If the face suffers, and is not an isolated monad unaffected by the violence done to it, then the linkage between the ethical and the causal, between transcendence and immanence, cannot be bracketed or suspended. The conditionality, complicity, and materiality of the self—a self that is riveted to the facticity of its bodily life that betrays it to violence (*OE* 52–53)—is articulated throughout Levinas's works, nowhere more powerfully than in his reflections on National Socialism and the Shoah, and on violence and war. Instead of naïvely asserting the priority of the ethical out of neglect of worldly affairs, Levinas begins the preface to *Totality and Infinity* by interrogating its very possibility in the context of war, violence, and the strategic assertion of the will in its struggle to survive.

War is, according to Levinas, "the truth of the real" and "the pure experience of pure being" (*TI* 21). Similarly, in initial response to the rise of Nazism, Levinas explored a decade earlier the brutality and fatality of the fact and there-ness of being pinned to the facticity of bodily being, blocking anyone from being free and at ease in the world, as well as blocking all means of escape (*OE* 51, 59; *UH* 20). The self-sufficiency and there-ness of being is seen as a kind of brutality, as freedom and dignity are assaulted by the brutal fact of being, a nonappropriable oppressive presence without refuge or escape (*OE* 49, 51).[15] Intentional consciousness experiences itself as a need without response and as a lack that cannot be fulfilled (59–60). In confrontation with the reality of violence, traumatism, and suffering, Levinas articulates the ethical address of the self by the other that breaks out in that very moment of the real, the very possibility of welcoming, hospitality, and justice (*TI* 27–28). Ethics does not bracket and avoid the fixated being it attempts to escape; it engages and questions the worldly causal nexus even as it is—as transcendent in being interruptive rather than in positing a substance, essence, or certainty beyond the world—irreducible to it.

Although comparative philosophy is an uncertain and difficult form of inquiry, and poses multiple challenges in the case of Levinas that I discuss elsewhere,[16] potential points of convergence have emerged: in

particular, the emphasis on the priority of the ethical in response to worldly suffering and its causal and violent conditions. From the perspective of self-reproducing worldly immanence, the ethical appears as a means to further ends, such as satisfaction or social order, and disappears under the weight of violence, struggle, and causal conditions. A responsibility or responsiveness to the other for her or his own sake seems naïvely deluded or intrinsically impossible given the egoism of the same and identical, as Levinas might say, or of attachment and absorption in the language of Buddhism. Yet as Levinas once asked of Rimbaud's "I as another": "Is it certain that [it] means only alteration, alienation, betrayal of self, strangeness of self, and servitude to that stranger?" (*HO* 62). If not, then responsibility and altruism lies latent in this very condition. It is precisely its violence, traumatism, and suffering that calls forth and is thus potentially interrupted by a qualitatively different kind of response. It is a response in which the ethical is not coercion but the undermining of coercion in welcoming, hospitality, and justice or in loving kindness (*mettā*), generosity (*dāna*), sympathetic joy (*mudita*), and compassion (*karuṇā*).

III. Karma and Emptiness

Given the constant and ethically problematic reification and essentialism of the said, in which one no longer hears or responds ethically to the other, one of the strengths of Levinas and Buddhism is that they not only serve as sources of fixation and domination, as each saying taken as a said does, but that they can place these—including their own self-reification—into question. Levinas does not dismiss skepticism and atheism but praises their ethical moment and takes them as the point of departure for the ethical itself and; as Perpich shows, skepticism itself enacts the ethical.[17] Even as Levinas articulates the noncognitive sources of the ethical, he equally emphasizes the role of reflection and reason in moral and social-political life. Buddhism, most radically in Mādhyamaka and Chan, prioritizes emptiness (Skt. *śūnyatā*; Ch. *kong,* 空), the emptiness of emptiness, and the paradoxical in relation to the positive practices and theses of Buddhism itself. Doing so, it calls attachment, as the prevailing source of delusion and suffering, into question.[18] This is especially an issue of self-attachment,

just as for Levinas ethics primarily concerns one's own responsibility for others rather than moralistically judging them. Buddhism not only allows for but also calls for and promotes critical self-examination. It does not eliminate even as it critiques the limitation of words and concepts. The moment of conceptual reflection, argument, and knowledge is not short-circuited since the Buddha, portrayed in the Pāli canon, sees genuine persuasion as requiring experiential verification, worldly knowledge, and ethical-meditative self-knowledge.

Buddhist and Levinasian ethics are not religious insofar as religion is defined as faith or subjective belief. Levinas explicitly rejects talk of faith and mystical experience in favor of the ethical encounter with and transcendence toward the other.[19] In the canonical portrayal of the Buddha, belief is only worthwhile if it is experientially verifiable and realizable in this very life through one's own insight.[20] For Zongmi Guifeng (宗密圭峰, 780–841), an important Tang Dynasty Buddist scholar, wisdom is to know the human, and illumination consists in knowing oneself and finding the source or root (本) for oneself.[21] The awakening of faith is not an end in itself. It should open up rather than close off the mindfulness that consists in being awakened by and tracelessly responsive to the suchness or as-is-ness (Skt. *tathātā;* Ch. *ru,* 如) of others and things or "freely manifesting oneself in response to things without any bounds."[22]

Tathātā is the interdependent uniqueness of particular things exhibited in their very unsacred secularity and everyday mundaneness, according to the Hongzhou 洪州 school of Chan Buddhism; its motto is "ordinary mind is the way" (平常心是道) or "this mind is the Buddha" (是心是佛).[23] Mazu Daoyi (馬祖道一, 709–788) described this ordinary mind as meaning "no intentional creation or action, no right or wrong, no grasping or rejecting, no terminable or permanent, no profane or holy.... Now all these are just the way: walking, abiding, sitting, lying, responding to conditions, and handling matters."[24] He continues: "Though the dharma is not attached to anything, every phenomenon one has contact with is thusness."[25] Hongzhou strategies have been criticized as antinomian and ignoring karmic causality since Zongmi, who argues that spontaneity (*ziran,* 自然) provides no basis for ethics and is only justifiable through karma.[26] Yet these Hongzhou and Linji (臨濟, Jp. Rinzai;

d. 866/7) Chan strategies might alternatively suggest the necessity of experientially encountering and engaging phenomena, including the self. Hongzhou and Linji Chan often challenge convention but are not necessarily unethical to the extent that they promote ethical spontaneity in encountering beings. This ethics of encounter is found in most varieties of Chan, and it challenges the conventions and hierarchies of prevailing ethical theory, including its anthropocentrism, insofar as it includes humans, sentient creatures, and even natural phenomena such as mountains and rivers, leaves and dewdrops, associated with Dōgen (道元) and the poems of Hanshan (寒山).

Even in radical antinomian and iconoclastic Hongzhou Chan, without self-inquiring and self-reflective processes, persuasion is—or risks becoming—the manipulation of desires and fears, love and hatred. Even if reflection ultimately needs to be transcended in Buddhist awakening, its significance in this world and its role on the way to that transcendence cannot be denied. The case can thus be made that reflection—as a necessary element for morality, meditation, and wisdom—is partly constitutive of that very awakening. As recent research into Mādhyamaka and Chan Buddhism indicates, concepts and language are necessary for unsettling the sedimentation of the conceptual and discursive that allows one to forget the barriers between self and other and be awakened by all things.[27] As visible in the skeptical and self-questioning strategies of the Buddha, Mādhyamaka, and Chan, Buddhism can involve challenging ordinary beliefs, habits, and practices—or a destructuring of reified structures. Of course, these three schools of Buddhism are not identical, and there are other schools that differ significantly from the account given here. Buddhism itself is not one phenomenon or position but a name designating a plurality of philosophical and religious approaches. Buddhist skeptical strategies employing emptiness do not aim at producing a state of doubt or negatively defined nothingness but enact an encounter with the phenomena themselves.

The self-manifestation of things is suggestively formulated by Dōgen who spoke of the self-blossoming of the world as it is and in its suchness, or the liberation and nonabiding of things as an abiding in their own phenomenal expression.[28] This process of destructuring in order to attend to and be mindful of the phenomena themselves—or

the suchness of things—is already a primary element in Buddhism. However, just as Levinas is challenged by the reification of the said, Buddhism continues to face the problem of a belief or structure of belief becoming reified such that it disables rather than enables being responsive to things and compassionate toward others. This danger is apparent in popular conceptions of karma. The remainder of this essay challenges such beliefs about karma by returning to the very phenomenon that karma was intended to address—namely, the ethical character of action—in order to open up possibilities for mindfulness and awakening.

IV. Karma as Causality, Morality, and Questionability

As the principal forms of ordinary Buddhist life are not meditative, but ethical and ritual practices based on beliefs about the causal transference of fault and merit, Buddhist karma is commonly interpreted as a kind of moral causality in which good actions yield good occurrences through merit and bad actions lead to bad occurrences through fault.[29] In popular Buddhist narratives, good and bad and cause and effect are interconnected in the performance of the deed, which is causally conditioned by previous deeds, generating future conditions of its own.[30] The image and ideal of the bodhisattva in Mahāyāna Buddhism is of a pure, spontaneous, ethical responsiveness to others without conditions or limitations, apparently unconcerned with karma or causality, and yet the bodhisattva is invoked precisely as a causally efficacious locus of merit that redeems and perfects sentient beings.

Chan Buddhism has been praised and criticized for its supposed antinomian and potentially nihilistic overcoming of good and evil and right and wrong. The image of a radically free, spontaneous awakening is associated with iconoclasm and breaking conventions, including those of traditional Buddhism and ordinary morality. This image of Chan is already rejected by Zongmi who interprets it as noncausal and therefore destructive of ethics. He condemns the rhetoric of a pure noncausal and nonkarmic spontaneity for what he sees as its immoral antinomian consequences in Daoism and Hongzhou Chan. Further, Baizhang (百丈) tells of a monk who denied karmic

conditioning but ended up conditioned by it by being reborn for 500 lives as a fox.[31] In a similar story in the *Wumenguan* (無門關, *Gateless Barrier*), a monk denies that the person of great cultivation falls into causality, and even though he believed that he himself was free from causal conditioning, he nevertheless remained trapped in it. Baizhang awakens him by responding to the question, "Does even a person of great cultivation fall into causality, or not?" with the answer, "Such a person does not obscure causality."[32]

This test-case of Baizhang's unobscured causality (不昧因果) suggests that karma involves a causality that the practitioner should neither fall into (and be captured in) nor fall out of (be exempt from) by forgetting or ignoring it.[33] One interpretation of Buddhist awakening—the one suggested in this essay based on an admittedly Chan Buddhist reading of some Buddhist texts and traditions—is that it is not a complete or otherworldly transcendence that leaves causality, morality, and the world behind. Instead, awakening is immanent and relational to cause and effect, if it is not to be the illusory freedom of causal indifference. Such spontaneity, whether it is conceived more or less ethically, cannot bracket or negate the worldly causal and ethical interdependence of self and other but is achieved through it.

V. Karma and Suffering

In the normative portrait of the Buddha, it is precisely being affected by the other's suffering—the disquiet, sickness, old age, and death of others—that set him on the path of awakening.[34] This encounter with and uncalculated response to suffering provided the basis for karma becoming ethical and the universe becoming a basically moral arena in early Buddhism.[35] Karma is therefore not a destiny or fatality that justifies suffering but instead opens up the possibility of confronting and responding to the reality of the other's suffering.

The first Noble Truth states that life involves suffering, un- or dis-ease (*dukkha*). This is not an invitation to stoically or religiously accept suffering as necessary or justified because it is natural or divinely ordained. The significance of the first truth of suffering is found in the three additional Noble Truths that constitute a response to the reality of suffering. These show that suffering has its causes and conditions,

such that it is not an incomprehensible and unquestionable destiny, and that one can respond to these through the cultivation of the Eightfold Path. If there is such a path, and if there is awakening, then suffering is the ordinary but not inevitable condition of things.

The Buddha's discourses did not inadequately answer the problematic of theodicy, since karma was never a reply to the issue of reconciling God's goodness with worldly suffering and evil. The question that karma responds to is, "How am I a being that is both conditioned and capable of acting otherwise, or how can I respond to my own and others' suffering?" Theodicy is conceptually necessary to any monotheism that wants to explain why God created a world full of suffering and evil, much as when Job's friends explain how his suffering must be due to previous wrongs. However, karma is not fulfilled in resignation but in responding to the suffering of the world, oneself and others, with compassion, mindfulness, and wisdom. It is significant that Levinas unfolds a conception of monotheism as inherently ethical through the example of Job, who does not resort to the theodicy-like explanations of his friends. On this conception, monotheism is not a sacrificial ideology, and good is the interruption of and break with evil.[36] *God* indicates the good that humans constantly betray by how they behave toward each other. It is then not a question only of the betrayal of the good but "awareness of its status as betrayal."[37] "Everything shows itself at the price of this betrayal, even the unsayable" such that goodness—the relation with the other—is inevitably a risk (*BPW7*, 113).

In Chan Buddhism, as in the Daoism of the *Zhuangzi*, "the interplay of skill (*qiao*) (technical action) and clumsiness (*zhuo*)" constitutes human life.[38] The iconoclastic betrayal of the Buddha and the Dharma in Hongzhou and Linji Chan is the clumsy and off-putting yet skillful realization of the way.[39] For Levinas, it is the struggle of the ethical in its very betrayal and impossibility that constitutes an ethical humanity. Language's fragility is equally the possibility of its ethical saying, which occurs in response to being and what is otherwise than being.[40] It is an awareness of its impossibility in that it is inevitably complicated and betrayed in its being said and enacted. "And yet," Levinas writes, "in its separation from the work and in

the possible betrayal that threatens it in the course of its very exercise, the will becomes aware of this" (*TI* 231). There is no ethics without violence, without betrayal, as Jacques Derrida insists in his reading of Levinas.[41]

Ethics is impossible as theodicy, but is there an ethics of karma? Instead of justifying and thus potentially excusing evil, as Levinas warns about theodicy in relation to the excess of suffering and evil, karma concerns the practical qualities of intentional action such as appropriateness and inappropriateness, skillfulness and unskillfulness, wholesomeness and unwholesomeness. Given these characteristics, it is an ethical or moral question that is answered by the ethical way of life formulated in the Eightfold Path. The question that karma addresses is, "What way of life is most choice-worthy given the reality of my own and others' suffering?"

Karma does not preclude transformative action, if it is a question that I pose to myself about "what ought to be done?" Am I accountable or responsible for my situation beyond my immediate intention? How should I respond to my situation? Should I continue to act as I have done or should I act otherwise? Although these questions are often posed and answered in the mode of self-interest and general happiness, that is, in terms of fruits and results, they reveal a more fundamental responsibility: I am responsible not only for what I do and why I do it but for the other as well. Although one might doubt the notion of *collective karma,* it is nevertheless the case that karma binds selves together in relations and networks of interdependence and responsibility. This moral sense of karma is not only a scholarly (as opposed to a popular) concern. The notion of rebirth in Sri Lankan popular Buddhism only deepens one's sense of responsibility for others and the social character of karma. My relations with others are unavoidable, given that I am bound to them not only in this life but in other lives as well.[42] The suffering that I ignore today, if I believe the other person deserves that suffering because of past deeds, will become part of my own suffering. In this context, the Buddha's appeal to self-interested happiness as a motive for morality[43] does not conclude but begins an awakening that transcends both meritorious and detrimental attachments, pleasure and pain, as well as the

happiness born of the detachment cultivated in the earlier stages of meditative practice (the jhānas).[44] Even if such self-interested concern were true of the *arhat* (the perfected person), the bodhisattva's infinite and spontaneous responsiveness to "the unequalled agony of every single being"[45] transcends self-interested redemption.

This transition from acting for the sake of oneself (one's own happiness) to acting for the sake of the other (the happiness of all sentient beings) suggests that a Buddhist notion of responsibility cannot be based in the egoism of self-interest or in the commands of obligation. Śāntideva (c. 685–763) remarked how one is praised for the merit of returning a favor. Such doing of good reflects the logic of exchange that informs ordinary thinking about self-interest and obligation. He then asks, "What, then, can be said of the Bodhisattva who does good without obligation?"[46] It might be argued that this absence of obligation implies an absence of responsibility, especially if one believes that responsibility signifies acting from a debt according to a sacrificial logic of command and exchange. However, might not the thought of a responsibility without obligation reflect an alternative way of thinking about the ethical rather than simply being immoral?

If the highest sense of the ethical is acting spontaneously—or purely passively in Levinas's language—for the sake of others, for all sentient beings and the entirety of things regardless of reward or punishment, then responsibility fulfills itself as the unforced and spontaneous freedom of the gift, of a giving without support or foundation. On giving without conditions, or charity without reliance on attachments and appearances, see the references to giving without the support of signs or qualities in the *Diamond Sutra*.[47] This generosity is effortless and spontaneous (for its own sake), since it is no longer concerned with merit or reward.[48] The spontaneity of giving, according to Dōgen, is appropriately the first of the perfections (*pāramitā*) because nothing more thoroughly transforms the mind.[49] Such pure action is not characterized by calculation of interests or expectations about the reciprocity of exchange, nor by withdrawal from the world.[50] It is effortless and at ease in confronting the world from within the world and thus not absorbed in its calculative prudence and exchange, which abandons the ethical while claiming to be in good conscience.

VI. Conclusion

Buddhist ethics, as karmic, dependently originated, and causal, is not purely normative. Karma cannot be understood according to the duality of *ought* and *is,* or as a natural, worldly causal determinism in contrast to a moral causality of freedom, as in Kantian autonomy and responsibility. Neither should it be construed as metaphysically or naturalistically neutral. The phenomenon that karma addresses is primarily the impermanent self-awakening to responsibility for what one does and does not do, that is, how the self interdependently exists in relation and response to itself, others, and the world without fixating either identity or difference.

Self-responsibility through karma is realized and overcome as a natural and effortless receptiveness to things—especially the spontaneous and uncoerced compassion in response to the actual suffering of others—that characterizes the Buddhas and bodhisattvas. It is important to distinguish such responsiveness from Western conceptions of accountability and guilt, which presuppose the constant identity of the agent. If karma does not apply to an isolated substantial self, then the individual is engaged in its actions and transformations, and is deeply responsible for what happens to others.

Not without affinities to Levinas, Buddhist ethics begins with self-interest, desire, and one's own place in the sun, but does not conclude with these. For Levinas, life and death stand in the tension of betrayal. Even as death threatens the betrayal of life, mere life is not only the betrayal of death as escape but also life's promise of happiness.[51] Without such passivity, dependence, and complicity, another distinct form of complicity—responsibility—would not be possible. There is not only complicity and betrayal but also the betrayal of betrayal on the failure of power: "But the violence of the sword lets the will it seeks to dominate escape. True violence conserves the freedom it coerces" (*CPP* 39).

The betrayal of betrayal is another kind of complicity, that of proximity and contact: "a complicity or alliance 'for nothing,' without content" or "a complicity for nothing, a fraternity, a proximity that is possible only as an openness" (*CPP* 121; *OB* 150). Goodness exists in the face of everyday life and its mechanical impersonality and senseless

suffering, even in the smallest expressions of kindness: "an interjection, a form of expression as undifferentiated as a wink, a sign to one's neighbor! A sign of what? Of life, of goodwill? Of complicity?" (*PN* 40). In the facticity of suffering and the ambiguity of complicity, there continue to be possibilities for transformation and transcendence toward the good beyond being *within* being—the realm of violence, suffering, and *saṃsāra*—itself.[52] It is our perpetual complicity in the *unethical* facticity of everyday life that magnifies the ethical import of our smallest actions, such that the tiniest acts of kindness begin to undo the totalizing instrumental economics of exchange.